

FRENCH REVOLUTION AS A WORLD
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government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its power in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence indeed will dictate that governments long established shall not be changed for light and transient causes ; and all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security." The principles enunciated in the historic document which founded a nation were reiterated in greater detail in the constitutions of the separate states ; and a few years later a French assembly was to borrow not only the spirit but in some cases the very words of its transatlantic model.

When the States-General met at Versailles in May 1789 for the first time since 1614, neither the king nor his advisers realized the importance of the decision they had taken. On ascending the throne Louis XVI had summoned Turgot to reform the finances ; but within two years the great minister had fallen and the plans of Necker, his successor, were ruined by intervention in the American war. After the fall of Necker in 1781 the Government drifted from expedient to expedient, until there was no escape save in an appeal to the nation. They were aware that financial assistance would have to be purchased by concessions and reforms, but it never occurred to them that they might be faced with the demand for the

transformation
of the traditional structure of the state and
society. Their
forecast was correct within certain limits, for the
members of
the States-General brought no mandate for
revolution. The
complaints and demands of the people were set
forth in the
Cahiers—a corpus of documents so voluminous
that even
to-day they have not all been printed—which
photograph the
mind of the nation in the spring of 1789. France
demands
reform, not revolution. The enemy is not the
monarchy but
feudalism. The cry is not for self-government but
for equality
before the law—equality of rights, equality of
burdens,
equality of opportunities. Though each of the
three Estates
drew up its own Cahiers, there is much in
common in their